

VZCZCXRO6139  
PP RUEHCI RUEHMT  
DE RUEHKT #0740/01 1820738  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 300738Z JUN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8765  
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6555  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 6867  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2164  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 4907  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 6112  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2498  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 4241  
RUEHMT/AMCONSUL MONTREAL PRIORITY 0001  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: WOMEN MAKE IMPORTANT STRIDES IN NEPAL'S CA ELECTION

Summary

1. (U) Nepali women made important strides in April's Constituent Assembly (CA) election, capturing 33 percent of the seats in the 601-member Assembly. Much of the increase in female representation can be attributed to the quota which required parties to fill half of the seats they won through proportional representation (PR) with female candidates. However, the number of women elected in first-past-the-post (FPTP) races also rose significantly, from 7.2 percent in 1999 to 12 percent in 2008. The large majority of women elected in FPTP contests were from the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). FPTP races also largely favored Brahmin and Chhetri women over women from traditionally marginalized groups. Yet women from a wide range of parties, castes and ethnic groups were able to gain representation through the new PR-based quota system.

Nepal's Female Representation Rises Dramatically

2. (U) Female candidates won just over 33 percent of the elected seats in Nepal's recent CA election, marking a major victory for women in Nepal. (Note: This percentage is calculated based on the combined 575 elected seats, since the cabinet has yet to agree on the 26 appointed seats. The number will have to be adjusted if women win any of the five by-elections which are currently scheduled. End Note.) The percentage of women in Nepal's legislative body is substantially higher than the global average of 17.8 percent, and is twice that of the current percentage of women in the United State Congress, which comes in at 16.5 percent. Nepal now ranks fourteenth in the percentage of female representatives in nationally elected assemblies, according to a UN report.

Comparing FPTP and PR Elections

3. (U) The new 601-member CA is comprised of FPTP seats, PR seats and individual seats appointed by the cabinet. FPTP races are direct elections where citizens vote for individual candidates. In these contests, women were elected to 30 out of a total of 240 seats, or 12.5 percent. The success of women in prominent races was mixed. In Rolpa 2, former Assistant Minister of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation Bhim Kumari Budha of the Nepali Congress (NC) lost to Maoist chairman Pushpa Dahal (aka Prachanda) and in Sunsari 5, Minister without Portfolio (and Prime Minister Koirala's daughter) Sujata Koirala of NC lost to Madhesi People's

Rights Forum (MPRF) chief Upendra Yadav. In Siraha 2, the outgoing Deputy Speaker of the Interim Parliament, Chitralekha Yadav of the NC, lost to MPRF's Raj Lal Yadav. However, the two sitting Maoist cabinet members, Minister for Physical Planning Hisila Yami and Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare Pampha Bhusal, were victorious in Kathmandu 7 and Lalitpur 3, respectively.

¶4. (U) Unlike the FPTP elections, the PR election involved votes cast for parties rather than individual candidates. Parties were then allowed to choose candidates from a pre-selected list to fill the seats they had won. Their candidate lists and their final choices were required to adhere to quotas that ensured representation of women as well as a number of other historically underrepresented groups. This quota system required that 50 percent of a party's seats went to women candidates. Out of 335 PR seats, women captured 161. (Note: Many parties that had only one seat tended to give it to a male candidate, and those with an odd number of seats also favored men. The percentage of women holding PR seats is therefore less than 50 percent of the total number of seats. End note.)

#### Maoists Dominate Female Representation

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¶5. (U) By far the party with the greatest number of successful female candidates - and of female candidates overall - in FPTP contests was the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which was the party of 24 of the 30 women elected. Among other parties, 2 NC women and 2 MPRF women won; 1 woman

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from the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and 1 from the Tarai Madhes Democratic Party also captured seats. Most of the successful Maoist women candidates ran in rural constituencies.

#### Substantial Increase Compared to Previous Nepali Parliaments

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¶6. (U) The April 10 election brought a substantial increase in the number of women elected. In the last general election in 1999, only 12 women were elected to the 205-member House of Representatives, as opposed to 30 women elected to the 240 FPTP seats this year. (Note: This year was the first time the PR election system was used.) The percentage of those running who were female also increased, from 6.3 percent in 1999 to 9.2 percent in 2008. There is also a larger number of women in the CA compared to the Interim Parliament, in which women held 51 out of a 328 seats, or roughly one-sixth of the total. Twenty-five of the 51 women in the Interim Parliament were Maoists.

#### Who Are the Women MPs?

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¶7. (U) The women members of the CA, like their male counterparts, represent a wide range of castes and ethnic groups. Of the 30 women elected in FPTP races, there are 11 Brahmin women, 7 Janajati, 6 Chettri, 4 Madhesi, 2 Dalit and 1 Muslim. (Note: One of the candidates is both Madhesi and Muslim. End note.) The distribution is much more equitable in the PR results. Among the 161 women elected in the PR contest, 30 are Brahmin, 14 Chettri, 57 Janajati, 33 Madhesi, 23 Dalit and 4 Muslim.

#### Comment

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¶8. (U) The results of the Constituent Assembly election reflect not only a sea change in women's public roles in Nepali society, but also a deep resistance to this change. Many parties appeared more concerned with meeting the quota than with actually having female representation. A significant number employed a strategy of placing men rather

than women in seats when there was a choice. Still, the fact that women occupy such a large number of seats is significant. The number more than doubled in the past nine years, with just 15.5 percent of total seats occupied by women in 1999, as opposed to 33 percent today. Clearly, the symbolism of this increase alone can be tremendously powerful. However, the future of the PR system is uncertain in Nepal. Many Nepali politicians who were in favor of the PR system for this election may not be in favor for the next general election, expected in two years. The battle to ensure adequate representation for women is far from over.

POWELL